

# EXPLORING BEST PRACTICES IN SUPERVISION OF GRADUATE STUDENTS

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the supervision practices of graduate assistant supervisors at two large research institutions. Six themes emerged as best practices: graduate assistant supervisors took a student-centered approach, provided thorough training, cultivated a learning-focused experience, established effective communication, built strong relationships with the supervised students, and reflected upon and invested in their own supervision style and supervisory experience in order to practice a situational approach.

Keywords: graduate assistant, graduate student, supervision, student affairs

Graduate students are the future of the student affairs profession, and their graduate school experiences are instrumental in the development of their professional knowledge, skills, and identity. Program faculty carefully design meaningful curricula, ensure courses are aligned with the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education Standards (CAS, 2019) and the ACPA/NASPA (2015) Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators, and many require students to hold graduate assistantships and complete multiple internships. Considering the nuances of the experiences and terminology, graduate assistant(ship) will be used as an all-encompassing term to include graduate assistantships, practicums, and internships. Graduate preparation programs have the opportunity to use the assistantship as a learning laboratory (Komives, 1988) in which theory learned in class is put to practice in order to encourage what Bolitzer et al. (2019) described as cross-context learning. Despite the thoughtful approach to designing curricula, a key source of learning - supervised practice in graduate assistantships - may be underutilized because supervisors are underprepared to support students' learning and development.

As defined in *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004), learning is "a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development, processes that have often been considered separate, and even independent of each other" (p. 2). Using this definition as a guide, the learning outside the classroom should not be overlooked. Graduate assistantships are a tool that can provide graduate students with an experiential learning opportunity, and graduate student supervisors should be a critical partners in their learning. The need to be a critical partner in learning differentiates the supervision of graduate students and full-time staff. Although all supervisees would benefit from a developmental approach to supervision, it is a critical component of the graduate assistant's learning. Unfortunately,

not all graduate student supervisors approach their role from a learning-centered perspective, and many have not received formal supervision training (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Hirt et al., 2017; Waple, 2006). Though the potential for experiential learning through the graduate assistantship is great, this is likely not typical.

Often, the supervisor will "make or break" the experience (Janosik et al., 2015), yet supervision is not a skill taught to many professionals (Peck Parrott, 2017). Entry-level supervisors are often charged with supervising graduate assistants, and supervision has been identified as a deficiency in entry-level student affairs professionals (Cooper et al., 2016). While demonstrating supervision skills is fundamental to their success, it is not often taught in graduate preparation programs. Instead of developing an approach based on formal training, supervisors may learn how to supervise based on how they have been supervised and their personal supervision preferences (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Peck Parrott, 2017). For example, if someone had a supervisor invested in their learning, they may be very invested in their graduate assistant's learning. However, if they had a less-invested supervisor, they might not actively engage in their learning.

Studies have explored different dimensions of supervision, considering the supervisee's experience and the supervisor's approach, which has resulted in models and approaches to supervision. Studies have explored the perspectives of both supervisors and new professionals (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004; Shupp & Arminio, 2012; Tull, 2006). In addition to the literature exploring the experience of supervision there are multiple models of supervision: the applied model for supervision (Pace et al., 2019), strategic supervision (Romsa & Romsa, 2016), synergistic supervision (Winston & Creamer, 1997), conscious identity supervision (Brown et al., 2019), and inclusive supervision (Wilson et al., 2020), to name a few. Despite the models and current research, there is little exploring the supervision of graduate

students.

Given the importance of supervision and the gap in the research and training of professionals (Hirt et al., 2017), it is imperative to understand how good supervisors support the learning and development of their graduate assistants. This qualitative study explored the supervision practices of graduate student supervisors at two large research institutions. Participants supervised both graduate assistants and graduate student interns. Data from 19 semi-structured interviews were examined to identify the supervision practices of graduate student supervisors and strategies that could be recommended for graduate student-supervised practice.

This study expands our understanding of professional preparation and provides graduate programs with strategies for enhancing students' learning and development through their graduate assistantship supervision. Additionally, the findings guide graduate assistant supervisors in tailoring their supervisory practices. Together, graduate programs and supervisors can develop more well-rounded professionals entering the workforce by providing opportunities for growth, creativity, and mentorship.

## Literature Review

Experiential learning is valuable and is often required in student affairs graduate preparation programs (Ardoin et al., 2019; CAS, 2019). Many students hold graduate assistantship positions that involve part-time employment within student affairs or other related offices. Additional opportunities come in the form of internships or practicum experiences. Students are able to apply what they learn in the classroom to real-world settings, often referred to as theory-to-practice (Barnes, 2020; Bolitzer et al., 2019). These experiences are pivotal for graduate students as they enter the workforce (Ardoin et al., 2019) and often provide the challenge and support needed for student development (Sanford, 1962). In fact, in

a study of novice higher education professionals' learning, Bolitzer et al. (2019) found that graduate students were able to learn concepts in the classroom and put them immediately into practice in their internship. These out-of-classroom opportunities provide graduate students with skills that are later leveraged as new practitioners (Ardoin et al., 2019).

Despite literature exploring the impacts and outcomes of graduate preparation programs, little is known about graduate assistant supervision. White and Nonnamaker (2011) offered insight into the relationship that exists between a graduate assistant supervisor and their supervisee. They suggested that the supervisor goes beyond their professional role to act as a mentor, teacher, and advisor to the graduate student. Additionally, supervisors may experience stress as the graduate assistantship position has high turnover, forcing the supervisor to train a new employee as frequently as every year. Quality supervision has been shown to decrease job dissatisfaction while reducing staff attrition and promoting career advancement, goal attainment, and quality work (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004; Shupp & Arminio, 2012; Tull, 2006). Supervision in higher education is used to maintain progress and to "enhance the personal and professional capabilities and performance of staff" (Winston & Creamer, 1997, p. 186). Supervision is critical to the development of staff and the institution, and synergistic supervision balances the needs of both (CAS, 2019); Winston & Creamer, 1997).

The synergistic supervision model, as coined by Winston and Creamer (1997), is particularly valued in higher education as it suggests supervision as a helping process. In supervising a person, both personal and professional needs are considered. The model encouraged supervisors to consider their staff development, similar to Pace et al. (2019) who acknowledged the need for supervisors to consider the developmental needs of supervisees. More recent models of supervision further the idea of synergistic supervision by in-

cluding an emphasis on diversity. Wilson et al. (2019) recommended the need for supervisors to create inclusive work environments, and Brown et al. (2019) highlighted identity-conscious supervision to dismantle systems of power that exist in many institutional landscapes.

Supervisors, mentors, and faculty can help new professionals develop their professional identity by offering constructive feedback, promoting individual agency, and encouraging self-authorship (Hirschy et al., 2015). Supervised practice opportunities promote professional identity development, and “an investment in mentoring relationships with faculty and practica or internship supervisors can cultivate expectations and commitment to the professional role” (Liddell et al., 2014, p. 70). The graduate assistantship provides a rich opportunity for learning and is contingent on faculty working with assistantship supervisors (Liddell, 2014). Supervising graduate students could be a critical component of their learning.

Despite the importance of such experiences, we did not find any studies identifying effective supervision practices for graduate students. While many studies focus on new student affairs professionals and not graduate students, the need for supervision for graduate students is critical to prepare exceptional full-time practitioners and laying the groundwork for their professional careers. Further, there is a need for specialized supervision of graduate students compared to supervising full-time staff.

## Methodology

For the purposes of this study, narrative inquiry was used. As Merriam (2009) described, “stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us” (p. 33). Narrative inquiry allowed the researchers to gather stories from graduate assistantship supervisors detailing their experiences supervising graduate students and then “re-story” them in a

format that would create a better understanding of the phenomenon of graduate assistant supervision (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allowed the researchers to examine each participant’s experiences.

The co-researchers of this study value and acknowledge the saliency of their varying identities in their approaches to this inquiry. Collectively, all members identify as White, cisgender women. Two of the researchers have a background as student affairs practitioners, with 27 years of experience between them, and are currently serving as higher education faculty. Both have directed student affairs preparation programs. At the time of data collection, two of the researchers were Ph.D. candidates in higher education, one of whom has several years of experience in student affairs, while the other has a background in women’s studies. One researcher is a recent graduate of a master’s in student affairs program and has recently begun her first professional position. These identities have allowed the opportunity to engage in various techniques and dialogue throughout the study while recognizing our lenses are limited in scope.

The study was driven by the ontological paradigm of interpretivism, emphasizing the belief that there is no single reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Similarly, the study was grounded in social constructivism, which suggests that there are numerous realities. In the study, the researchers utilized social constructivism to understand the experiences of each of the supervisors, acknowledging that each participant’s experience was unique.

## Participants

Purposeful sampling techniques were used to identify information-rich participants from whom the most possible could be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to ensure participants were supervisors skilled at supervising student affairs graduate assistantships, the researchers used convenience sampling, a type of purposeful sam-

pling, by soliciting nominations from the graduates of master's-level Student Affairs programs at two institutions. At both institutions, each student was required to hold a graduate assistantship during their time as a graduate student. Emails requesting the graduates nominate outstanding supervisors were sent to the five most recent cohorts of graduates. Nominations were submitted through an online form that required the nominator to provide a short description of what they perceived made their former supervisor an effective supervisor. The research team then contacted the nominated supervisors to request their participation in the study.

Though more were nominated, 19 supervisors agreed to participate in the study. The participating supervisors represented diverse identities, with six identifying as Black or African American, one as Latina, and 12 as White. They worked in a span of functional areas of student and academic affairs, including housing, student activities, leadership, student unions, orientation, student conduct, advising, and admissions with a wide range of years of experience. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure privacy.

### Data Collection and Data Analysis

To collect data, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Most of the interviews were conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing for face-to-face interviews, yet some took place over Zoom. With participant consent, interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed. Each transcript was reviewed and checked for errors by the researchers and each participant. As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), semi-structured interviews allowed for the questions to be guided by existing research, while still allowing for unique responses and experiences of the participants. The questions included in the interview protocol guide were based upon Winston and Creamer's (1997) Synergistic Supervision model.

Data analysis began by reviewing the 19

transcripts with the goal of identifying the elements of high-quality graduate assistantship supervision. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested, the data were broken down into separate units, each being:

the smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself - that is, it must be interpretable in the absence of any additional information other than a broad understanding of the context in which the inquiry is carried out (p. 345).

These units were then identified using open codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), allowing for unlimited possibilities. These open codes were analyzed further in reference to the interviewers' field notes. The codes were then processed using axial/analytical coding, allowing for the interpretation of the meaning of the codes in relation to the purpose of the study to identify the best practices of graduate assistantship supervision. A physical diagram of the 39 initial codes and tentative categories was created. Through extensive review as a research team and actual application of the data into categories, the codes and categories emerged into six shared themes.

### Ensuring Trustworthiness

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested a variety of strategies to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of a qualitative study. One way the research team developed trustworthiness was through peer review and triangulation of the themes from both institutions. Additionally, the researchers ensured member checking by seeking participant feedback. Employing a two-phase member check, recorded transcriptions of interviews were shared with participants to ascertain the data accurately reflected their perspectives and experiences, and then the themes were shared with the participants. Only one participant asked for clarification on some of the themes. As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) an initial preliminary code list was created after analyzing a few transcripts and then ap-



plied to the remaining transcripts. Coding was compared across researchers to ensure intercoder agreement.

## Findings

The 19 supervisors, identified by their former supervisees as exceptional supervisors, came from a variety of levels of experience and backgrounds; however, there were striking similarities in their approach and views of graduate student supervision. From the analysis of their interviews, six themes of graduate assistant supervision emerged.

### Supervision is Student-Centered and Individualized

In a variety of ways, supervisors approached their supervision from a student-centered and individualized perspective. Elizabeth stated, “I’m an individualized supervisor. So, I adapt my supervision style to [what] the individual I’m supervising needs from me...I’m going to invest a lot in them.” Perhaps more than they would do for undergraduate student workers or full-time professional employees, these exceptional supervisors approached each student individually and, as Elizabeth described, sought to tailor their work experience to their individual goals. Alice stated “So I really tried to listen and understand what they want out of the position too, so that it meets their needs personally and professionally.” Elijah explained he would ask,

What is the experience you want to get out of this? With a professional, I could see like they have an understanding coming in and kind of know the experience they wanted to get... because in many ways they’re already in the field. Whereas those grads, and sometimes especially those going into higher ed, like this is stuff that they might’ve just found out about in the last 18 to 24 months.

Jazz stated,

My number one priority is their experience and I don’t want a graduate student to come into this role and complete 20 hours doing something that they absolutely do not like to do. There might be time for that as a professional, right, they might get that experience as a professional. But I want this experience to be what they want to get out of it...I need to view the students less as somebody who has a job to do, but more as somebody who has an experience to gain.

Supervisors focused on the experience of the student, structuring their communication, supervision, and interactions to help create a personalized experience for the student. As Caleb shared, they sought to include autonomy in their roles: “And so I think sometimes that autonomy surprises graduate students, but I found, I think it helps them advance really quickly and feel confident in their role. And that’s my hope.” Several spoke specifically of incorporating the concept of challenge and support (Sanford, 1962) into their practice. Jennifer described challenging one timid graduate student to negotiate prices with vendors and long afterward the student continued to talk about being grateful for the challenge, the support, and the learning opportunity this experience created.

### The Critical Role of Training

Training was an important part of the supervisory experience, according to each of the supervisors. Several supervisors described the onboarding process beginning before the graduate student moved to campus; one supervisor even described onboarding beginning in the interview. Training occurred immediately upon campus arrival, was intentional, and was well-planned. James explained, “We’ve been able to start grads weeks before the official start of the semester and that is important as it allows us to do their onboarding and training properly. I don’t think you can onboard anybody in a day.” Thorough onboarding was provided through transition materials and meetings between the student, the supervisors, and critical

others.

Danielle described, “We have a really extensive graduate assistant manual that we send out over the summer. So that they can be reading and kind of just getting to know our office because not everybody’s from our university.” Supervisors were cognizant to include information on organizational context and spent time setting expectations. Jazz stated,

Onboarding first and foremost gives them a layout of the culture, gives them a layout of the organization, helps them understand the direction and then helps them understand how they fit into that direction...It’s important to know what the colleague down the hallway does and how that contributes to your work...I think it’s a disservice to the student if you bring them into your organization and then have them only focus on what they’re going to do from day to day.

Training did not end after orientation and even took place “from the moment I get them until they graduate” (Jackie). Supervisors were committed to the continued growth and development of students and created training opportunities for students to learn new skills and build their professional networks.

### Learning as the Central Focus

One of the more intriguing findings of the study was that across all 19 supervisors, learning was central to the focus of their work with graduate assistants. Many noted they approached the supervision of graduate assistants differently than their supervision of full-time staff members because they recognized the experience was designed to allow students to learn. Elijah explained,

They are here to truly learn and grow. That is not just an understanding of a field or an understanding of working in a higher education setting in general, but it’s truly understanding who they are and what they’re looking to do going forward.

Russell embraces experiential learning and

then provides opportunity for feedback and reflection. He shared,

...like throwing them out [there], having them try something that’s going to be a risk where they just do something and then we’d talk about it. How did it go?... So like, did it blow up? Was it what you expected?

Several of the supervisors spoke of the need for intentional reflection, Erin shared, “when those learning moments happen is when they [supervisors] take the time to process their [the graduate assistant’s] experiences with them.” Many of the supervisors actively integrated classroom learning into the graduate assistantship experience and encouraged the graduate assistant to have a holistic view of the experience. Elizabeth explained,

It’s the ability to [think], I took this advising class, but I’m actually advising the student and it’s not going like the textbook. So how do we take what that was, you know, kind of that surface level, and dive much deeper into kind of the nuances and the complicated parts of that?

For some supervisors this was formalized through learning contracts, for others it occurred more informally through one-on-one meetings, but most frequently by intentionally asking the graduate assistant what they were learning in their classes and how it applied to their work experiences. Supervisors also recognized the importance of their own continued learning.

### Communication

Every supervisor interviewed discussed communication and its critical role in developing a meaningful supervisory relationship. “So, one of my big rules...is communicate, communicate, communicate. And that is so I can understand who you are, what you need, and what you want” (Elijah). Communication was designed based on individual needs. Paige shared, “I let [them] know like this is typically my style, but also, like what works

for you? So, making sure that there's a balance." The communication was purposeful and occurred in various ways, dependent upon the immediacy and type of communication. Almost all of the supervisors emphasized the importance of face-to-face communication and regular one-on-one meetings. However, the format of those meetings could be formal and in the office or more informal. James explained,

I try to do a lunch with grad students...just kind of a chance to get to know them and break barriers. And our director will also do what she calls 'fun-on-ones' with the graduate students, just a chance to connect with them and hear them out and ask about their experiences. And so, my communication with them is a little bit of the formal and then a lot of the informal as well.

A critical component of communication was providing feedback. All of the supervisors believed regular feedback was important and should largely be done face-to-face. Megan stated,

So, I try to [provide feedback] pretty consistently so that it's never something that is at the end of the year, at the end of the semester and they look like at this point, I can't do anything to change it.

While many spoke of providing feedback particularly during one-on-one regular meetings, several also mentioned the need to provide feedback in the moment as well. "I try to incorporate feedback in every one-on-one that I do...because that's the best way for them to learn and understand...none of my staff will ever be surprised in an evaluation of how I've observed them" (Jackie). Ana described, "I feel like if you've let a week go by without addressing [a work error] you've almost lost your ability to correct it." Jazz further explained,

Feedback is a challenging aspect of the supervision relationship. Because when you do build that trust and

you do build that relationship, it can also be hard to take criticism from that person or feedback from that person. It can go both ways, you know, and I would hope that as I build that trust with the student that they're able to take the feedback from me because they trust me, but it could go the opposite direction, you know, so I'm very careful about how I provide that feedback.

## Relationship Building

One theme that emerged from all of the supervisors was the importance of building a relationship with their graduate assistant that went beyond the scope of the professional role. Owl described,

We got to know each other. We talked about our families. We talked about our loved ones, what's going on, we made connections. We understand what we're going through, right. This is the foundation of trust....it's just interest in another person.

James expanded, "I spend a lot of time thinking about who they are, who they want to be, and how I am part of their experience." Jerry expounded,

So, I want to know how the person is doing and I want to know how their families are doing. When I say, 'How are you doing today?' I actually really mean it. How can I help you to be successful? That's on the job, that's in the classroom, that's outside the classroom.

Supervisors valued having a high degree of trust with their graduate assistants and spent time cultivating the relationship. Seth explained, "I have to show that I'm a credible person to be trusted." Supervisors invested in the relationship through their own vulnerability with the graduate assistant. Jackie stated,

I practice vulnerability in my leadership. And I think there is a difference between being vulnerable and not being emotionally stable and having those boundaries,



right? So, vulnerability for me is letting folks know that my lens is influenced by my mother passing and her not being in my life anymore. So, there are some moments where I, I protect myself and I kind of set some walls up...some of them are not at all sure what that feels like, but they respect my boundary. It has opened up a world for me of knowing things about people that I would have never known if I didn't allow myself to practice vulnerability.

Through sharing their own successes, struggles, and owning their mistakes the supervisors enrich the learning of the graduate student. Jackie stated,

Once that relationship is built, I try really hard not to break it, and I let them know that I'm an imperfect leader. At some point, I will disappoint them. At some point, they may do something to disappoint me but it doesn't make you a disappointment, [it] just makes it a moment that we gotta get through together.

### Supervision and Supervisor Experience

The individual supervisors' experience, training, and approach to supervision were evident throughout the interviews. The majority of supervisors had received little to no formal training in supervision and learned their approach through experience. While a few mentioned the occasional training or workshop, almost all cited they had little or no supervision training, particularly with regard to supervising graduate assistants. Christie shared,

Pretty early on in my career, I did go through the [supervision training course] with human resources. But, but, yeah, that was, that was really it, you know. I haven't been really involved with those, you know, level of courses in a while.

Many said their own first professional positions required them to supervise a graduate assistant. James stated, "training is key. It's something I learned in student affairs, that could be its own

study, the lack of training that happens when professionals transition to different roles." Many described adjusting their style and approach to meet the needs of their supervisees. Erin stated, maybe synergistic, it's what it's called...it's very...I like them to drive the relationship more than me. So, I think, very adaptable and flexible to meet what they need, when they need it." Several of the supervisors described their approach as situational or as a coach,

So, I think at the end of the day, I want to make sure that I am truly coaching them to be as significant as they can be, because success is gonna look different. But if they feel like they leave, they are experienced under my leadership and feel like, you know what? I was valued. I was loved. I was appreciated here. That's what matters to me the most, regardless of everything we might've been able to accomplish over the year. (Elijah)

Although all of the supervisors brought varying levels of experience, both in years of experience and functional area, the six themes provide insight into how graduate student supervisors can structure their relationship to support the learning of the students.

### Discussion

As the results of this study are considered, there are some study design choices that should be acknowledged. While we have tried to provide thick, rich description for the purposes of transferability, our sample size was small, the participants represented multiple institutions, and many were large research universities with well-funded divisions of student affairs with assistantship opportunities.

The majority of the interviews occurred prior to the start of the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has greatly impacted higher education, and student affairs professionals are navigating a new normal. Although many professionals shift-

ed to a virtual environment during the pandemic, now there are a variety of models including working completely virtually to hybrid to completely face-to-face on campus. The reader will need to consider the findings in lieu of changes in their environment.

As described in the research team positionality section, our research team held similar social identities. However, our participants spoke from a variety of identities, years of experience, and backgrounds. The research team continually engaged in discussions to challenge implicit bias and perspectives as we engaged in the research and data analysis.

### **Synergistic Supervision**

In 1997, Winston and Creamer proposed a synergistic approach to supervision, upon which much of the research in the area of student affairs supervision has been based (Arminio & Creamer, 2001; Ingwersen, 2018; Schupp & Arminio, 2012; Tull, 2006;). The synergistic supervision model (Winston & Creamer, 1997) balanced the needs and goals of the supervisee with those of the institution, and when those came into conflict, exemplary supervisors focused on the needs of the supervisee. One of the critical findings of this study was the emphasis the supervisors placed on the needs and learning of the graduate student, which is in line with the synergistic model but seems to take it to a new level for graduate assistantships. The implications of this study reach beyond the role of the supervisor. The supervisor, the supervisee, and the graduate preparation programs could equally benefit from the findings. Our discussion will focus on the implications for supervisors and recommendations for future research.

### **Implications for Supervised Practice**

As described above, six themes emerged as best practices in graduate student supervision. Graduate student supervisors took a student-centered approach, provided thorough training at the beginning and throughout the graduate assistant-

ship, centered learning throughout the experience, established effective communication practices, built strong relationships with the students they supervised, and reflected upon and invested in their own supervision style and supervisory experience in order to practice a synergistic approach.

### **Self-Awareness**

The first step for any supervisor is to evaluate their own supervisory style. They may consider: how they developed their supervisory style, if their approach to supervision allows considered differences amongst the needs of their supervisees, and any biases they may have. How supervisors have learned to supervise will influence how they supervise and will directly relate to the experience they provide to the student. This self-evaluation will also provide an opportunity for gap identification. Although supervision is not frequently covered in graduate preparation programs (Cooper et al., 2016), there is training available for those supervisors who seek it.

### **Individualize the Experience**

Using a challenge and support approach (Sanford, 1962), supervisors are encouraged to create an individualized plan for the students they supervise while striving to provide a “real world” experience. The goal is for students to learn from the experience without creating the expectation that every position will be customized to their needs. Graduate assistantships are not created equal. Some are rich with opportunities to engage in practice, while others are more administrative or narrowly focused. Supervisors should be thoughtful about how the big picture connects to the individualized student experience. Individualizing the experience allows students to engage in cross-context learning, which can positively influence their learning (Bolitzer et al., 2019). Graduate assistant supervisors should see their students as individuals and focus on their development; however, this cannot be at the expense of a student learning how to socialize in the profession professionally. With-

out a balanced approach, the student may struggle as a new professional if their new environment is not as developmentally focused as their graduate assistantship. Students need to be prepared to work in reality and not just in the ideal environment that can be created in graduate school (Ardoin et al., 2019).

### **Training and Learning**

A comprehensive onboarding process is a key to establishing a strong foundation to begin the learning process for graduate students. Supervisors should provide hands-on training and help students recognize when they are learning through experience. Integration of classroom learning is critical to enhancing the student's academic and professional development. Integration in practice can be as simple as asking the student about classroom learning. However, learning is not limited to the graduate student. Supervisors are encouraged to engage in continual improvement and development. Often supervisors of graduate students are new professionals who are just beginning to develop their supervisory style and skills (Peck Parrott, 2017). Most supervisors do not receive formal training on supervising, and even the best supervisors benefit from continuing to gain knowledge and skills in supervision (Hirt et al., 2017; Waple, 2006).

### **Communication Matters**

Early in the supervisory relationship, communication expectations should be established. These may vary across supervisory relationships - the specific expectations themselves are not as important as the fact expectations exist. It is valuable to consider the work environment and institutional context when establishing expectations that serve both the organization and the student; however, regular communication is critical across environments. Face-to-face communication was an effective strategy for providing feedback, project instruction, and facilitating learning within the assistantship. This supervision practice will pro-

vide students with an opportunity to learn how to communicate within professional settings effectively. Extra attention is needed to provide clear expectations when communication occurs across a virtual environment.

### **Relationship Building**

The relationship between supervisor and graduate student is integral to the student's learning journey. Supervisors may be called to serve as a mentor for the graduate student since they are in the process of learning to become student affairs professionals (White & Nonnamaker, 2011). Similar to what Shupp and Arminio (2012) found in their study of new professionals, students are seeking both professional and individualized personal support as they learn how to be student affairs educators. Graduate student supervisors build space for a relationship to emerge in a way that works for both the supervisor and graduate student. In addition to the supervisor-supervisee relationship, supervisors have the opportunity to assist students in building their professional network across the institution and profession.

Supervisors play a critical role in the development of professionals and employee satisfaction (Marshall et al., 2016). Graduate assistantship supervisors have the additional responsibility of integrating learning into their supervisory approach. It would be a detriment to the graduate student if supervisors did not acknowledge and accept their role in the graduate student's integrated experience.

### **Future Research**

Supervision is often not a taught skill but something that is learned through trial-and-error (Stock-Ward, 2003). Despite a dearth of research and discussion surrounding supervision, it remains critical to the success of graduate students and new professionals (Marshall et al., 2016; Young, 2019). Continued research is needed to better understand the supervision experience,

both from the perspective of the supervisor and the supervisee. Opportunities for future research include exploring supervision across different social identities, supervisor position titles, educational backgrounds, and institution types. Although our study included diverse participants, more research is needed to understand how the supervisor and supervisee's social identities influence the learning of graduate students and their future success in the profession. Despite our study utilizing an asset-based approach, another opportunity for future research is to identify poor supervision practices to encourage our profession's longevity.

Further exploration of the connection and relationship between graduate preparation programs and the graduate assistantship position is urgently needed to maximize professional growth. How is learning intentionally being supported across experiences? What are the implications for students who are not required to have a graduate assistantship during their program? How are graduate assistantships similar or different in their scope of responsibilities and opportunities to learn? How does the graduate assistantship experience influence the transition to a new professional role? And finally, if a graduate student has an outstanding supervisor in graduate school, are they more or less successful in transitioning into new roles?

## Conclusion

Davis and Cooper (2017) stated "the strength of our profession demands quality supervision of new professionals is taken seriously" (p. 67). We would contend it is equally critical to recognize the importance of graduate assistant supervision. Following the recommendations of Davis and Cooper (2017), we sought to elicit the narratives of graduate assistant supervisors identified by their supervisees as exceptional so we might better understand the actual practice of quality graduate assistant supervision. Their stories are just

the beginning, but they provide us with valuable insight into the elements of excellent supervision and how this might be replicated by supervisors and supported by graduate preparation programs to ensure the development of the next generation of exceptional student affairs professionals.

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